



11-15-2001

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### Recommended Citation

Ames, Brian (2001) "The Pearl of the World," *Westview*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol21/iss1/9>

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# The Pearl of the World

by Brian Ames

I remember the classroom of my eighth-grade English teacher, Mr. Holmberg. The desks were small, close, cramped in the way I imagined the cockpits of World War I trainers would have been. Their surfaces suggested wingforms, canted planes, cambered for the airflow of education. The desk-top contours invoked the foils of biplanes. In the same manner we possess quadrad faith in the mechanics of flight—lift, gravity, drag, thrust—faith drove Mr. Holmberg's classroom, and thousands of eighth-grade classrooms across America. Better people through education.

On a spring morning our teacher commenced class by lifting an object or, rather, two half objects, for his students to see. His hands trembled slightly. He held two paperbacked halves of *The Pearl*, Steinbeck's novella of evil springing forth from unearned good fortune. The book had been torn in half.

As Mr. Holmberg held the bookhalves forth, he sputtered through tight lips, a red face: "I know who did this." He glared across the classroom of two dozen innocent and one guilty. "I want the person who did this to own up to it. I know who you are, and I want to see you. After class will be fine."

"Rest assured, I know who did this," he promised, and inherent in this twice-repeated phrase was an oath of consequences both terrible and imminent.

My insides crawled not from shame, but from the embarrassment of having been found out, and the surety of pending punishment. I glanced over to the receptacle where I'd dumped the two halves of the paperback after my minor act of vandalism. My eyes snapped back to Mr. Holmberg, knowing he had seen me steal a peek at the trash can. I was relieved to discover him looking elsewhere at the moment. Still, I grew hot in the face, on my neck, chest. But then thought, "If he knows who did it,

why this display for the entire class?" Of course he didn't know—he was on a fishing expedition.

Today, twenty-two years later, I imagine him entering the classroom that morning. It might have been the beginning of the most pleasant day of his life. Or he may have been laboring under untold stresses, exigencies. He may have been evaluating his career as an educator at that exact moment, wondering whether a small paycheck and the long hours were worth it, whether his additional duties as basketball coach would mean utility bills could be paid on time.

I imagine him walking down one of the aisles between desks, looking down at nothing in particular. The opening of the trash can is suddenly in his field of vision. I imagine he sees something bright inside—orange and white. He recognizes it as the cover of *The Pearl*, wonders *What's that doing in there?*

I imagine he stoops to retrieve it and as he lifts, sees the second, bifurcated half underneath the first, surrounded by the plasticine liner and other refuse. He sees the ragged edge of the tear along the paperback spine; for a microsecond, he is confused. *What?*

He thinks. And as he is retrieving first one half of the book and then the other, confusion morphs into comprehension and anger. He holds a small atrocity in his hands. His anger subsides after a few minutes, slides a long, deep distance into sadness, perhaps corrupts into depression.

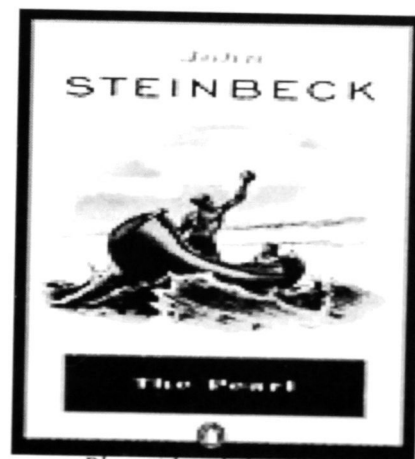


Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall





Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

In his hands, I imagine the abomination.

My birthstone is, of course, the pearl. I wrote a poem about how pearls are formed. Its first line functions as its title as well, so it reads like this:

*"There is a pearl/In my eye that used to be a grain/below the surface of the ocean, the grain/a bit of quartz moving from time/in shifting current./The revolving of the planet and/conditions on the sea's face caused/the current to eddy and pull/the grain into the maw of a shell./Where it was beached on a tender/membrane, which protested the intrusion/and drowned it—an innocent/enough act of self-preservation./In time a woman found the shell, /pinching the meat from inside and noting/the orb, which had grown into/pearlhood. It shone like a small nova."*

Stated scientifically, a pearl is the defense of certain types of bivalve mollusks against an intrusion. Unwanted, unasked for, a grain of sand slips across the orifice of one of these shells—that of an oyster, for example. The mollusk reacts by secreting nacre—mother of pearl—the lustrous substance that layers the inner walls of shells. Mother of pearl is composed primarily of aragonite crystals, a mineral form of crystalline calcium carbonate. (The

crystal is orthorhombic—shaped like a rhombus, or, geometrically, as crystals are often described, as an equilateral parallelogram. Which could be a square, and give rise to the succulent notion that from a series of austere squares might derive some object of circular beauty—a sphere of pearl.) A film of nacre coats the grain of sand. Then another, and another, until the sphere becomes stratified like our own earth. A pearl, thus, is a concretion of scar tissue, exactly like a person, me or you. Other concretions in nature: stalagmites, stalactites, finger- and toenails, carcinogenic tumors.



When Kino found the Pearl of the World, he uncorked all kinds of trouble for himself, Juana and little Coyotito. That is one of the lessons of *The Pearl*. When I vandalized a paperback copy of Steinbeck's book in the eighth grade, I uncorked, unwittingly, a heretofore-unknown sort of trouble in my own life—the coil and strike of an Unanswerable Question.

I keep wondering why I did it. I wish I could remember the reason. I have a feeling it is important.

There's a story told by Marines who were present at the fall of Saigon, those last two days,



April 29 and 30, 1975. We all are familiar with the pictures—defining images of rooftop helicopter evacuations that seem to encapsulate the frustration of Vietnam. Operation Frequent Wind was the name given to this military procedure, the evacuation of the U.S. Embassy under Ambassador Graham Martin.

The story goes that Martin wanted to return to his apartment to destroy some sensitive documents, and by this time, Saigon had gone berserk with panic. In spite of the counsel of his security detail, the ambassador insisted on returning to his flat. There, he instructed bodyguards to destroy classified files with thermite and frag grenades. Then Martin turned the grenades on a grand piano that stood in one of the apartment's rooms. He couldn't imagine the ivory keys caressed by the fingertips of North Vietnamese soldiers, fallen into the hands of the enemy. What kind of hideous music would they have made?

The piano, a neutral object and wellspring for the creative, forever silenced. Like my eighth-grade paperback copy of *The Pearl*. At least, ostensibly, Martin had his reasons. I'm still looking for mine.

When a Swissair jetliner, Flight 111, crashed into Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia, on September 2, 1998, it carried a rare painting in its cargo hold. Pablo Picasso painted *Le Peintre* in March 1967. There's a picture in my mind of the painting, a yard high, a little over two feet wide, supported with framing and soft, protective wrap, in the hold. The picture disintegrates into scraps of canvas and oil paint as the airliner breaks apart. I can see the bits of canvas floating in seawater like disturbed dust, spinning slowly through detritus of the aircraft, through lifesblood. A million and a half dollars worth of canvas and oil enters the food chain.

And no one ever again will stand before and admire the soft blues and earthtones of *Le Peintre*. The voice of this work is forever silenced; only its echo remains in the electronic pixels or dot matrices of reproduction. Like this, of one copy of *The Pearl*, the copy I shorn in half, only an echo re-

mains. It pounds in my ears.

I think of book- and record-burnings and porcelain smashed to shards in bombed-out rubble. Artworks that will never again enervate. I wonder why and come up with no answer at all.



I have seen the Hong Kong pearl markets, which flourish in tight, neon streets. I've walked there in Tsim Sha Tsui and taken the Star Ferry across bright green waters packed with junks to the Central District, lifted strands of pearls to admire them, to feel their coolness, their smoothness, cascade across my fingers and forearms.

I've bargained with the vendors there.

In Nagoya, I once walked five miles across Japan's second largest city to visit the Noritake factory and see how bone china is shaped, fired, painted, glazed. All across this metropolis, every third shop featured cultured pearls.

I purchased a pearl ring for my spouse one day,



Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall



at SeaWorld in San Diego, of all places. It was an act of contrition, tangible evidence of an amends.

Back in the long, insouciant days of the eighth grade, I joined with a classmate in a dangerous prank. After school one day, we slung a single strand of heavy-gage electric-fence wire across a road near our school, then hid in the drainage ditch to see what would happen when an automobile ran through it.

We waited in hiding, keen with anticipation and sprung to run. Then we heard the sound of a low-cycled scooter motor from the end of the road and saw, to our horror, the approach of the school's librarian on a moped—his head and neck unprotected by a windshield. We froze where we should have leapt up to stop him, then we closed our eyes expecting, I suppose, a horrific decapitation. When we opened them, he was through the wire and up the road, no brakelights, no pause, no indication that we had committed potentially lethal mischief. The wire lay at the side of the road, thrown back a little by the force of its snapping, into the ditch. We assumed him oblivious, and ourselves lucky.

No harm, no foul.



A review of Steinbeck's *The Pearl* from Amazon.com's website: "This book couldn't be worse; don't even use it as a doorstep; it'll scare away your visitors. I agree with the other 'pearl haters' anyone who reads this must be fully caught up with their sleep not to drowse off. Do not get the book unless you need firewood! Got it? Okay, if I see another person buy this book, I know the world has problems."

I also thought *The Pearl* was boring in the

eighth grade. I suppose I needed the kind of more direct stimulation provided by literature like *Eerie*, *Famous Monsters of Filmland* or *Vampirella*. Maybe I tore *The Pearl* in half because I was merely restless and had some sort of deficiency of shiny objects, at that moment, with which to distract myself.

Another Amazon.com review: "I had to read *The Pearl* for school and until now all the books I read for school were horrible, but *The Pearl* stood out. I didn't want it to finish. The worst thing about the book was that it was so short. I feel Steinbeck did such a great job, if he was still alive I would shake his hand."

To what can be ascribed the difference? Personal taste at fourteen years old? Perhaps Reader No. 2 discovered something shiny therein to pique his or her interest; something that escaped me at the time. You say to-may-to, I say to-mah-to. Let's call the whole thing off.



I recently re-read *The Pearl*, found it terrific. It made me want to reread all of Steinbeck. It made me wish I had written it, to write something one-twentieth as good myself.

What can I do but say that I am sorry I tore *The Pearl* in half? A pearl wraps beauty around a core of grit. At the center is a black secret. Without it, there is no luminescence. I open my pearl's ink core and show it to all of you. Can I bargain with the act, as if it were a strand of pearls, the price of repatriation negotiable?

So much time has passed; it's *okay* now, isn't it?

